Seeking Solutions to Global and Local Hunger

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While the percentage of the world population suffering from food insecurity has decreased over the past decades, the number of people suffering hunger in the growing world population has increased. That is the good news, but more bad news greets us on the 31st anniversary of World Food Day. The latest U.N. agency’s report states that one out of every eight people in the world, some 868 million people, are chronically undernourished (Reuters 2012:1). In September of 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that more than 50 million Americans or one out of every six Americans face the reality of food insecurity. Seventeen million of them are children (PRNewswire 2012:1). The term food insecurity refers to both the inability to secure an adequate diet today and the risk of being unable to do so in the future.

The landscape of agriculture has changed dramatically since the first World Food Day in 1981. The quest for bio-fuels is absorbing more and more arable land that formally was dedicated to growing food. Food pricing has become very volatile as food is considered a commodity for trade rather than a human right. Due to food scarcity, some countries are engaged in land grabbing: the buying or leasing of land, primarily in Africa, to fulfill their food needs in the future. The introduction of transgenic cropping which demands increased use of chemical fertilizer and pesticides has made farming more expensive. Climate change with its accompanying droughts and severe weather has serious negative impacts on agriculture. And finally, the austerity budgets many countries are adopting threaten the amount of money for international food aid and for national food programs. These changes are having a strong influence in the present and will continue to do so without significant changes in food production and policy.

The assessment of food insecurity and hunger has four different dimensions: global, national, the household...
and individual. From a global perspective hunger should not exist in the world because world agriculture produces sufficient food to nourish every person on the planet. However that global dimension of food security is dominated by agri-business, trade liberalization and the importation of large food chain stores into the so-called developing world, while the problem of hunger is one of distribution and poverty. People in poverty lack either the money to purchase food or the land to grow enough food to satisfy needs.

In recent years so-called developing countries have again begun to invest in domestic agriculture after years of neglect under the dictates of economic structural adjustment. However, national agriculture is vulnerable to the global demand of food for export either in the form of “luxury foods” or flowers for the developed world, land grabbing and the use of land for bio-fuels. These absorb land and water and neglect the demand for local food for food security.

Household and individual food insecurity is tied to poverty at the household level caused by lack of resources, “an extremely unequal income distribution in the world and in specific countries, by conflict and hunger itself” (World Hunger and Poverty Facts and Statistics 2012:2). Extreme poverty remains an alarming problem today, not only in developing countries but in a growing number of so-called developed countries, including the U.S.

Seeking Solutions

One positive development is the growing participation of institutions, countries, research centers, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and peoples’ movements seeking solutions to the enduring problem. However, the solutions put forward by these various entities differ in their analysis and approaches and often contradict each other. An analysis of these various approaches can fall under the general rubrics: food security, food sovereignty and hybrids of both.

Food Security: While the concept of food security as defined by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is generally accepted, the process by which to achieve it is under considerable debate. Influenced by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its agenda of liberalizing and globalizing trade, a number of countries have organized their economies around a competitive export-oriented agriculture, primarily based on an industrial agriculture model (Altieri 2009:102 and Lee 2007:4). This interest and influence on agricultural trade is driven by corporate interests that dominate the global food chain from access to seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides, food processing and packaging to distribution and marketing. Under global trade liberalization, national and global food security are intertwined, often to the detriment of the small economies and universal availability of food for all people.

Moreover, industrial agriculture with its emphasis on production, exports, transgenic crops (GMOs) along with their high demand for water, chemical fertilizers and pesticides is currently criticized for its contribution to climate change, loss of biodiversity and unsustainability in water and soil use.

Food Sovereignty: The food sovereignty movement arose as a policy framework in 1996, “principally as a response to the inclusion of agriculture within the world trading system” (Lee 2007:5). Its creation is generally credited to Via Campesina, an organization of small farmers and livestock owners which includes farmer association from across the world. Via Campesina defines food sovereignty as:

“... the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security” (1996:1 as quoted in Lee 2007:6).

Subsequently many NGOS, social movements and local groups have coalesced around this common framework.
The food sovereignty movement identifies four priority areas: 1) the right to food; 2) access to productive resources; 3) mainstreaming of agroecological production; and 4) trade and local markets (Lee 2007:6). Agro-ecological production is a blending of modern agro-ecological science with traditional and indigenous knowledge that has been shown to conserve natural resources, biodiversity and soil and water in the production of a sustainable form of agriculture. Throughout the world many small farmers are sharing and applying these principles to proven success and increased production (Altieri 2009:103).

The food sovereignty movement believes “that in order to protect livelihoods, jobs, peoples’ food security and health as well as the environment, food production must remain in the hands of small-scale sustainable farmers . . . it focuses on local autonomy, local markets, local production-consumption cycles, energy and technology and farmer-to-farmer networks” (Altieri 2009:111).

**Hybrid Solutions:** Hybrid solutions use elements of both food security and food sovereignty in their efforts to address global hunger. The focus tends to be on increasing production and the further commercialization of food. While they identify small farmers, including women farmers, as a target, they also engage corporations involved in industrial agriculture and global food chains. For example, AGRA (The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa) sponsored by the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations, is seeking to reinvent the Green Revolution adopted by India in the 1960s. The Green Revolution, did enhance food production, but has subsequently been proven unsustainable “as it damaged the environment, caused dramatic loss of biodiversity and associated traditional knowledge, favored wealthier farmers and left many poor farmers in debt” (Rosset 2006 as quoted in Altieri 2009:102). This approach leads small farmers to be more dependent on foreign inputs and patent-protected plant varieties contrary to the agenda of local sovereignty, mainstreaming agro-ecology and reducing poverty of the Food Sovereignty movement.

Similar approach are being advocated by the G8’s recent launching of the “New Alliance for Food Security” at their 2012 meeting and the U.S. program “Feed the Future” launched in 2009. While employing the rhetoric of supporting the small local farmers, including women, they both encourage and engage in partnerships with large industrial agriculture which promote GMOs and chemical dependent agricultural practices—expensive and damaging to the environment.

**Conclusion**

Hunger in the world is a long and seemingly intractable problem. The problem has been exacerbated by the recent developments in global trade, the demand for bio-fuels and climate change. Its solutions will be years in the making and require a serious overhaul of the dominant models of current agriculture practice and policy, trade policy and the approach to climate change. Several clear values should direct these changes: the human right to food; the alleviation of poverty; development of local food production and distribution; and protection of the environment. Without seriously addressing these values, the moral and ethical disgrace of hungry people in our midst will not be solved.

**What Can You Do:**

- Support local farmers and farmer’s markets;
- Purchase organic foods and ask stores to stock them;
- Use scare resources, such as water, sparingly;
- Support moving farm subsidies in the Agriculture Bill away from agribusiness into local organic farming;
- Live sustainably—reduce consumerism.
Endnotes

1 According to the FAO, “Food Security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (World Food Summit, 1996).

2 G-8 countries include Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom, U.S.

Resources Consulted


